

## CHILDREN OF INCARCERATED PARENTS: An Overview

**ABSTRACT:** The experiences of and care for children who have one or both parents in jail or prison raise important issues for families, policymakers and the general public. In 2007, 1.7 million children in the United States had a parent in prison.<sup>1</sup> Children of incarcerated parents experience challenges both unique to parental incarceration and similar to children with other life stressors. This brief provides an overview of issues related to children with incarcerated parents and a description of several evidence-based interventions targeted at children of incarcerated parents.

As of 2007, 2.3% of U.S. children had a parent in prison, an increase of 80% between 1991 and 2007.<sup>1</sup> In other words, 1 in 50 children in the U.S. has a parent who is currently incarcerated. For every incarcerated parent, there are 2.1 children under 18 with a parent currently in prison. Additionally, the effects of incarcerated parents reach beyond the immediate family into broader networks of grandparents, cousins, aunts and uncles. These numbers do not include the numerous children who have a parent in a jail or community correctional facility. Parents may spend months and even years held in these local detention centers, separated from their children.

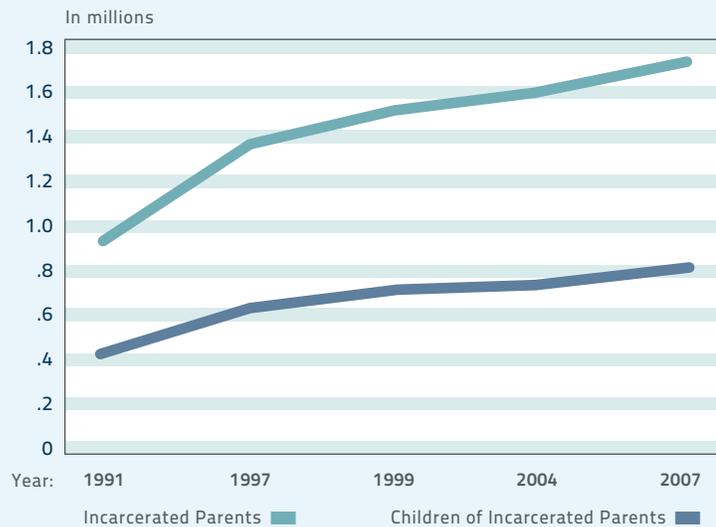
Figure 1 shows the national rise in parental incarceration over the past two decades. A majority of prisoners are parents: 52% of state inmates and 63% of federal inmates are parents of minor children.<sup>1</sup> In 2012, Ohio state prisons held 47,008 men and 3,868 women. If Ohio follows national trends of 62% of women and 51% of men in state prisons reporting having at least one child under 18, then

an estimated 26,000 Ohio adult prisoners have children under 18 (this estimate also does not include teen parents held in juvenile correctional facilities or adults in a jail or community correctional facility).

Reflecting long-standing racial disparities in the U.S. prison population, similar racial disparities exist for children with incarcerated parents (see Figure 2). Black children are 7.5 times more likely than white children to have a parent in prison, and Hispanic children are 2.5 times more likely to have an incarcerated parent than white children.<sup>1</sup> For both men and women, drug and public-order offenders were more likely to report having children than violent offenders.<sup>1</sup>

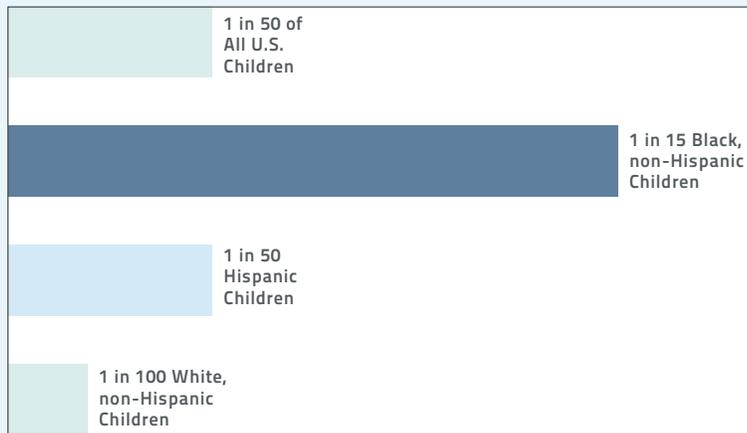
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**FIGURE 1. ESTIMATED NUMBER OF PARENTS IN STATE AND FEDERAL PRISONS AND THEIR MINOR CHILDREN**



Source: Glaze LE, Maruschak LM. Parents in Prison and Their Minor Children. 2008. Available at: <http://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/pptmc.pdf>.

FIGURE 2. RACIAL DISPARITIES AMONG CHILDREN WITH INCARCERATED PARENTS



Source: Glaze LE, Maruschak LM. Parents in Prison and Their Minor Children. 2008. Available at: <http://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/pptmc.pdf>.

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children of incarcerated parents continued >

#### UNDERSTANDING THE TRAUMA FACED BY CHILDREN OF INCARCERATED PARENTS

Parental incarceration often occurs within the context of many other potential life stressors and trauma factors,<sup>2-11</sup> such as parental substance abuse, mental health problems, economic instability and inadequate education. For example, 57% of parents in state prison have a mental health problem, and 67% report current substance abuse or dependence.<sup>1</sup> The experience of parental arrest and incarceration may compound this trauma (see Table 1). Children may also experience difficulties associated with the loss of financial support provided by the incarcerated parent<sup>3</sup> and parental separation or divorce due to incarceration.<sup>12,13</sup>

Parental incarceration has been conceptualized as an adverse childhood experience (ACE) that occurs within the context of multiple traumas.<sup>3</sup> Incarceration can disrupt a child's attachment to a

primary caregiver, which can have long-reaching impacts beyond the period of incarceration.<sup>3,7,16</sup> Bronfenbrenner's ecological model,<sup>18</sup> adapted to children with incarcerated parents in Figure 3, provides an illustration of the many factors at multiple levels that may impact a child with an incarcerated parent. These may include the development of secure attachments to both the incarcerated parent and caregivers during incarceration, connections between parents and caregivers, parent and caregiver poverty and disadvantage, and societal attitudes towards formerly incarcerated people.<sup>19</sup> The effects of incarceration may also be related to children's exposure to the parent's arrest and previous criminal activity.<sup>3,4,14,15</sup> The negative effects of parental incarceration may be mediated by other factors, such as social advantage, effective parenting and children's empathy, suggesting potential points for intervention.<sup>20,21</sup>

#### Who Cares for Children with Incarcerated Parents

High quality, stable care of children of incarcerated parents is an important way to mitigate the trauma of parental incarceration.<sup>3,17</sup> The majority of incarcerated parents indicate the other parent is the child's current caregiver.<sup>1</sup> However this statistic masks caregiving patterns according to gender (see Table 2), due to the higher prevalence of incarcerated fathers than incarcerated mothers.<sup>1,9</sup> 88% of fathers report their child's mother as the current caregiver, compared to 37% of mothers reporting their child's father as the current caregiver.<sup>1</sup> Grandparents play a significant role in caregiving during incarceration, especially for children with incarcerated mothers.<sup>1</sup> When parental or relative care is unavailable or unsafe, children may be placed in foster care. Incarcerated mothers are five times more likely than incarcerated fathers to report their child is currently in foster care.<sup>1</sup> The choice of caregiver can

have a significant impact on the stability and consistency of care while a parent is incarcerated. For example, previous research has found that placement with a father during a mother's incarceration was more stable than placement with grandparents or other family members.<sup>17</sup>

As demonstrated by differences in caregivers reported above, the gender of the incarcerated parent can play an important role in children's experience of incarceration. Paternal incarceration is more frequent than maternal incarceration.<sup>1</sup> Maternal incarceration may be especially disruptive to a child's daily routines. Mothers are more likely than fathers to report living with at least one child prior to incarceration and providing most of the daily care for their children.<sup>1, 5, 7, 10, 22, 23</sup> Children of incarcerated mothers are also more likely to have been exposed to their mother's arrest and criminal activities than children of incarcerated fathers.<sup>14</sup> Maternal incarceration is generally linked to greater risk of adverse outcomes, both because of a higher frequency of separation from

a primary caregiver and a greater risk of having both parents incarcerated when a mother is incarcerated.<sup>3-5, 9</sup> For example, adult children of incarcerated mothers are 2.5 times more likely to experience incarceration than adult children of incarcerated fathers.<sup>4</sup>

#### Long-Term Effects of Parental Incarceration

The effects of parental incarceration may be long reaching, especially in the context of other stressors such as poverty and mental illness. In a study of incarcerated parents, only 42% with a current substance problem and 30% with mental health problems had received treatment since incarceration,<sup>1</sup> suggesting that these families may continue to face challenges following release. Formerly-incarcerated mothers have high rates of depression, substance abuse, and history of domestic violence.<sup>12</sup> In other research, parental incarceration in the past 2 years was associated with family conflict, family victimization and children's delinquency, even when taking into account additional risk factors.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, a history of parental incarceration is associated with

family victimization and delinquency even after a parent returns to home,<sup>2</sup> and with poor family functioning and increased problem behaviors through childhood and adolescence.<sup>24</sup>

Another long-reaching effect of parental incarceration may be an increased risk of future incarceration for the child. Over half of incarcerated parents report having a family member ever incarcerated.<sup>1</sup> Communities in which there is a high rate of parental incarceration may make the experience seem "normal", thus in part contributing to a multigenerational cycle of incarceration.<sup>5</sup> Previous research has found that maternal incarceration during childhood is associated with increased risk of adult incarceration.<sup>25</sup> After release, disenfranchisement of previously incarcerated individuals may contribute to family economic insecurity,<sup>26</sup> and formerly incarcerated parents may not be able to access social safety net services. Therefore, providing adequate social support and connections to community resources following incarceration are key to the best possible child outcomes.<sup>12, 18</sup>

Throughout the experience of parental arrest and incarceration, children may experience compounded trauma as a result.

TABLE 1: POTENTIAL CHILD TRAUMAS RELATED TO PARENTAL INCARCERATION

- Violence and Trauma Related to Parent's Criminal Activity<sup>3, 5, 14</sup>
- Trauma Experienced During Parent's Arrest<sup>3, 14, 15</sup>
- Separation from Primary Caregiver<sup>3, 7, 16, 21</sup>
- Separation from Siblings<sup>21</sup>
- Loss of Financial Support from Parent<sup>3</sup>
- Uncertainty about Length of Parental Incarceration<sup>28</sup>
- Loss of Contact with Parent<sup>15, 21</sup>
- Environment During Visitation<sup>3, 13, 23, 30</sup>
- Difficulty Adjusting to Parent's Return<sup>54</sup>
- Loss of Family Access to Social Safety Net<sup>5</sup>

**WORKING WITH CHILDREN OF INCARCERATED PARENTS**

Children with incarcerated parents need ongoing support to mitigate the effects of parental incarceration. Previous research has identified various evidence-based strategies for reducing the adverse effects of parental incarceration, including communication about parent’s incarceration, stable caregiving during parental incarceration, preferably with a family member, contact with the incarcerated parent, and therapy and other forms of emotional support for children.<sup>21,27</sup> Programs offered to incarcerated parents to improve parenting skills and reduce other risk factors may play a key role in improving long-term outcomes. Additionally, reducing parental incarceration through prison diversion programs and allowing parents to remain with their children when feasible are promising strategies for mitigating the effects of parental incarceration. As a set of guidelines for potential interventions and policy changes, the San Francisco

Children of Incarcerated Parents Partnership has released a Bill of Rights for children of incarcerated parents and an associated agenda for action (Table 3).<sup>28</sup> These action items offer specific opportunities for practice and policy improvements.

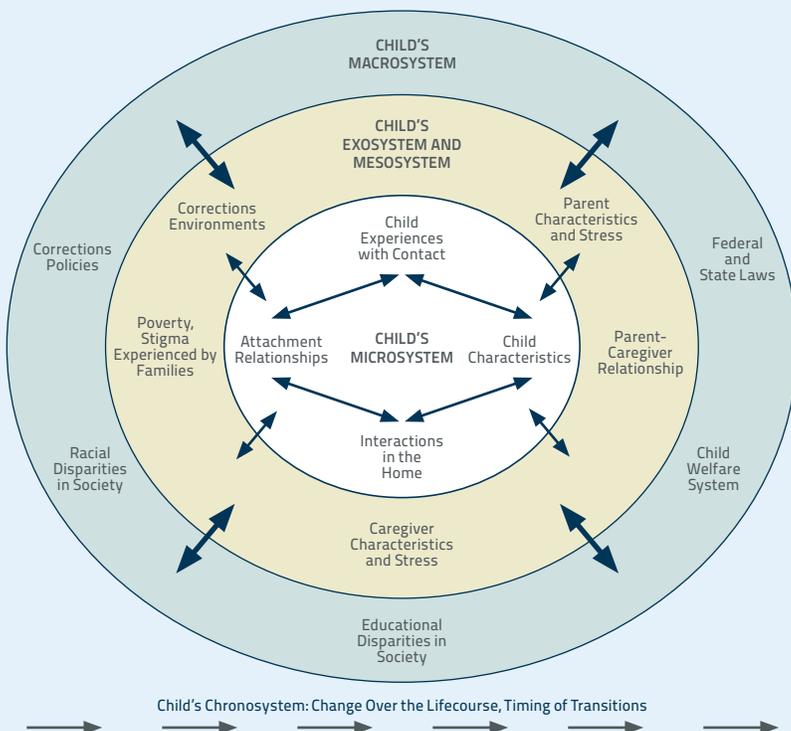
**Communicating with and Supporting Children**

Multiple authors have noted the importance of communicating with children about incarceration.<sup>21,27,29</sup> Allowing children to grieve the loss of the incarcerated parent by communicating with them about incarceration is more important than preventing exposure to the stigma of imprisonment.<sup>26,30</sup> Age-appropriate picture books, such as *Visiting Day*<sup>31</sup> and *The Night Dad Went to Jail*<sup>32</sup> provide a opening point for discussion with children about incarceration.<sup>29</sup> The Sesame Workshop’s “Little Children, Big Challenges” toolkit is a bilingual multimedia resource for providers and caregivers of children ages 3 to

8 experiencing parental incarceration, centered around the character Alex, whose father is in jail.<sup>33</sup>

Various resources are available to providers working with children with incarcerated parents. The Washington Department of Social and Health Services maintains a web-based toolkit for providers working with children of incarcerated parents and their families.<sup>34</sup> The National Resource Center on Children and Families of the Incarcerated provides listings of national, state and local programs for assisting children of incarcerated parents (<http://nrccfi.camden.rutgers.edu/>). Other resources aimed more broadly at children who have experienced trauma may also be helpful in supporting children with incarcerated parents.<sup>35</sup> Programs such as Girl Scouts Beyond Bars (see page 6) and summer camps for children of incarcerated parents<sup>29</sup> are key sources for peer support of children with incarcerated parents. Mentoring programs may also provide an important support resource.<sup>29</sup>

FIGURE 3: THE ECOLOGICAL CONTEXT OF CHILDREN WITH INCARCERATED PARENTS



The negative effects of parental incarceration may be mediated by other factors, such as social advantage, effective parenting and children’s empathy, suggesting potential points for intervention.<sup>20, 21</sup>

Source: Poehlmann J, Dallaire D, Loper AB, Shear LD. Children’s contact with their incarcerated parents: research findings and recommendations. *Am Psychol.* 2010;65(6):575-598.

High quality, stable care of children of incarcerated parents is an important way to mitigate the trauma of parental incarceration.<sup>3, 17</sup>

TABLE 2: CURRENT CAREGIVER OF MINOR CHILDREN OF PARENTS IN STATE PRISON<sup>1</sup>

Current Caregiver of Child(ren)	Children of Incarcerated Fathers	Children of Incarcerated Mothers	Children with One or Both Parents Incarcerated
Other Parent	88.4%	37.0%	84.2%
Grandparent(s)	12.5%	44.9%	15.1%
Other Relatives	4.7%	22.8%	6.2%
Foster Home or Agency	2.2%	10.9%	2.9%
Friends and Others	2.4%	7.8%	2.9%

Source: Glaze LE, Maruschak LM. Parents in Prison and Their Minor Children. 2008. Available at: <http://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/pptmc.pdf>.

### Promoting Stable Caregiving

Programs to supporting strong caregiver relationships with the child are essential for both child and caregiver well-being.<sup>6, 18</sup> Promoting a child's secure attachment to a consistent caregiver may mitigate the negative effects of incarceration.<sup>4</sup> As siblings may provide important attachment, caregiving arrangements that keep siblings together are especially important.<sup>21</sup> Previous studies have found that children's behavior is strongly associated with caregivers' warmth and acceptance, while caregiver stress was strongly associated degree of acceptance towards the child.<sup>6</sup> Caregivers also report a high degree of financial stress<sup>6</sup> and providing economic support may help reduce caregiver stress.<sup>28</sup> Supporting caregivers also has benefits for incarcerated parents themselves. During incarceration, a stronger alliance with a child's caregiver is associated with reduced parenting stress among incarcerated parents<sup>23</sup> and continuity of care throughout a mother's incarceration.<sup>21</sup>

### Promoting Contact with the Incarcerated Parent

Contact with incarcerated parents varies widely. In a study of incarcerated parents, three-quarters of incarcerated parents in state prison report at least some contact

with their child since incarceration: 70% via letters, 53% over telephone, 42% in visits.<sup>1</sup> Mothers were more likely to have had any contact than were fathers.<sup>1</sup> During paternal incarceration, mothers play an important role in maintaining contact between a father and his children.<sup>36, 37</sup> Previous research suggests that contact with fathers follows one of two patterns: fathers either have no contact with children during their incarceration or frequent visits.<sup>38</sup>

In-person contact with incarcerated parents may or may not be beneficial for children.<sup>3, 10, 16, 18, 39</sup> Visiting an incarcerated parent may promote child adjustment and reduce negative outcomes, but visits can also remind children of past traumatic experiences.<sup>3</sup> Creating a child-friendly visiting environment, including permitting physical contact with children and providing opportunities to play, may promote more positive contact with incarcerated parents.<sup>3, 18, 26</sup> Lack of privacy, prohibitions against physical contact, long waits, short visits, and disrespectful treatment by staff are all complaints from those visiting incarcerated family members.<sup>30</sup> Incarcerated parents report difficulties with short visits, leaving children at the end of a visit and the reminder of what they are missing.<sup>23</sup>

Visits can also be extremely emotionally-charged experiences for both parents and children.<sup>13</sup> Programs to promote extended visits in home-like environments provide important opportunities for positive contact between incarcerated parents and their children.<sup>40 (p2)</sup> Interventions that support children and caregivers throughout the visiting process may provide more positive contact with incarcerated parents.<sup>18</sup>

In contrast with the challenges posed by in-person visits, research suggests that promoting mail contact between parents and children has many benefits.<sup>18</sup> Phone calls also provide contact between parents and children. However, the high cost of collect calls can be especially financially stressful for families with low economic resources.<sup>18</sup> Eliminating or reducing these fees may improve contact between incarcerated parents and their children.<sup>18</sup> New technologies offer another possibility for nurturing the bond between incarcerated parents and their children.<sup>41</sup> Programs such as the **Read to Me Daddy/Mommy Project** in Louisiana<sup>42</sup> and the **Oklahoma Messages Project**<sup>43</sup> record DVDs of incarcerated parents reading books to their children, providing children with important parental contact between visits.

TABLE 3: CHILDREN OF INCARCERATED PARENTS  
A BILL OF RIGHTS AND ACTION AGENDA <sup>40</sup>

1. I have the right to be kept safe and informed at the time of my parent's arrest.
  - Develop arrest protocols that support and protect children.
  - Offer children and/or their caregivers basic information about the post-arrest process.
2. I have the right to be heard when decisions are made about me.
  - Train staff at institutions whose constituency includes children of incarcerated parents to recognize and address these children's needs and concerns.
  - Tell the truth.
  - Listen.
3. I have the right to be considered when decisions are made about my parent.
  - Review current sentencing law in terms of its impact on children and families.
  - Turn arrest into an opportunity for family preservation.
  - Include a family impact statement in pre-sentence investigation reports.
4. I have the right to be well cared for in my parent's absence.
  - Support children by supporting their caregivers.
  - Offer subsidized guardianship.
5. I have the right to speak with, see and touch my parent.
  - Provide access to visiting rooms that are child-centered, non-intimidating and conducive to bonding.
  - Consider proximity to family when siting prisons and assigning prisoners.
  - Encourage child welfare departments to facilitate contact.
6. I have the right to support as I face my parent's incarceration.
  - Train adults who work with young people to recognize the needs and concerns of children whose parents are incarcerated.
  - Provide access to specially trained therapists, counselors, and/or mentors.
  - Save five percent of corrections budget for families.
7. I have the right not to be judged, blamed or labeled because my parent is incarcerated.
  - Create opportunities for children of incarcerated parents to communicate with and support each other.
  - Create a truth fit to tell.
  - Consider differential response when a parent is arrested.
8. I have the right to a lifelong relationship with my parent.
  - Re-examine the Adoption and Safe Families Act.
  - Designate a family services coordinator at prisons and jails.
  - Support incarcerated parents upon reentry.
  - Focus on rehabilitation and alternatives to incarceration.

The **Girl Scouts Beyond Bars (GSBB)** program is a more than 20 year old model within Girl Scouts of America for daughters with incarcerated mothers.<sup>44</sup> The program is aimed at improving mother/daughter bonds, teaching life skills for post-release life to mothers and promoting leadership among daughters.<sup>45</sup> GSBB combines community meetings with daughters, in facility meetings with mothers and daughters, enrichment activities for mothers, and support for caregivers.<sup>45</sup> The U.S. Department of Justice Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention partially funds the program and provides transportation to prison facilities and programming within prisons.<sup>44</sup> Evaluations of the program have found significant improvements in mother-daughter relationship, behavioral improvements in daughters and development of leadership skills in both mothers and daughters.<sup>44</sup>

#### Programs for Incarcerated Parents

Parenting programs within prisons have been promoted as a promising way of improving child outcomes during parental incarceration and after parental release. However, parenting programs within prisons are often not evidence-based or standardized across different prison contexts.<sup>46</sup> A 2006 review found that few parenting program evaluations were conducted comparing experimental with control groups or actual parenting outcomes.<sup>47</sup> Even so, these programs improved inmates' self-esteem and attitudes towards parenting.<sup>47</sup> In designing programs, parenting education should be tailored to individual parent's needs, provide support and include coaching related to actual child contact.<sup>47</sup> Successful programs provide parents with parenting knowledge and skills as well as acceptance and support from program peers.<sup>48</sup> The **"Parenting Inside Out"** program<sup>46,49</sup> and the **"Parenting from the Inside"** program<sup>50</sup> are both evidence-based strategies for improving parent and child well-being.

## Reducing Parental Incarceration and Separation

Prison nursery programs and jail-diversion programs are another key intervention for reducing the impact of parental incarceration on children. Prison nursery programs allow women with infants to keep their young children with them in detention facilities. These programs can promote similar rates of secure attachments to children raised in the community, especially for infants who live with their mothers for at least a year and when mothers receive parenting courses.<sup>51</sup> For example, one jail-diversion program for substance-using pregnant women and mothers of infants, offers mental health and parenting skills components. Results of a study of the program showed that mothers who completed the intervention had levels of infant attachment security comparable to low-risk community participants.<sup>52</sup> Two Oregon-based programs consider current parenting status as a factor in sentencing, allowing non-violent offenders to enter community diversion- programs instead of detention facilities.<sup>29</sup>

### THE NEED FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Initiatives to improve data collection on children of incarcerated parents have already been implemented as part of the Bureau of Justice Statistics Survey of Prison Inmates, providing a needed longitudinal perspective of the effects of incarceration on parents and children.<sup>53</sup> However, there is minimal data on the prevalence of children with incarcerated parents in facilities other than state and federal prisons, such as local jails, detention centers or community correctional facilities. Additional research is also needed to further identify evidence-based interventions to support children of incarcerated parents, the effects of arrest, court involvement and incarcerated parent contact on child development and children's perspectives on parental incarceration.<sup>18</sup>

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